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SIMON In a spy drama, intrigue makes heart fonder

I guess this is a love story. It involves spies and the CIA and a helicopter mission and being shot down, but I guess it is a love story.

It may even be true. I doubt it. But you never know.

A woman named Dolores wrote me a letter a few weeks ago. "Please believe me: this is not a joke," she wrote. She said she was in love with a man named Frank, who worked for the CIA.

"Frank and I met in June and fell in love," she said. "He asked for retirement from the CIA so that we could have a normal life together. Frank is 43, I am 40, so we are no kids.

"The organization [the CIA] apparently gave approval. Frank's replacement was trained and he began career relocation. But they kept delaying his final separation by a week or two at a time.

"On Oct. 21, Frank called me from Seattle and said that a very big problem had arisen and that he had to stay on for one last mission. That was the last I heard from him."

Dolores supplied Frank's last name and other details about him and his work for the CIA.

I figure there are two ways to view her story.

You could believe that Frank really works for the CIA, went on some mission and disappeared as spies sometimes do.

Or you could look upon it the way most skeptical people and any cynical newsman would: that Frank doesn't work for the CIA. That he just tells that to women. That he isn't off on any mission. That he just cooks up this phony baloney to make his life look more exciting.

In early November, Dolores got a call. The caller identified himself as "Bob" and said he was Frank's boss at the CIA.

He told Dolores that "Frank's team had gone out on this mission in a helicopter and had not returned. He said they were being detained by 'other people' and that the organization was doing everything possible to find him and get him back."

There are two ways to view this. You could believe that Frank really has been shot down behind enemy lines — whoever the enemy is these days — and that he really is being held prisoner.

Or you could figure that Frank got some pal to join the hoax. Maybe he was trying to be kind. Maybe he was trying to be cruel. Who knows?

But Dolores believes the whole story. And she pleaded with me to find Frank's boss to make sure Frank was all right.

"I want to know that they are still looking and that I am not forgotten," she told me. "I truly believe that you are in a position to help me if you are willing."

So I called the CIA. Not because I believed the story. In a postscript to her letter, Dolores wrote: "Frank admires you as much as I do. He had the pleasure of meeting you once at a CIA party in Washington."

But, to the best of my knowledge, I have never met Frank. And I certainly have never been to a CIA party, in Washington or anywhere else. Does the CIA throw parties? If they did, why would they invite me?

But I called the CIA, anyway, and spoke to Kathy Pherson, a spokesperson. I gave her the details about Frank.

She laughed. "Let me understand this," she said. "Frank is 43 and is retiring. Whose government does he work for?"

Pherson explained that a lot of people claim to work for the CIA. "Even candidates running for office claim it, and we check and find they never have," she said.

But, unless it involves some legal matter, the CIA doesn't say who works for it and who doesn't.

"It's a crime to impersonate a federal officer," she said. "So if someone said he was in the CIA and used that to threaten someone or defraud someone, that person could go to the FBI and the FBI would call us and we would tell the FBI whether he really worked for us or not."

Which doesn't help at all in this case.

"No," Pherson admitted, "it doesn't. Officially, I can only say that we cannot confirm or deny whether this person works for us. But I can tell you I'd be very surprised if it were true. It sounds off-the-wall to me."

I called Dolores and told her that the CIA wouldn't say anything about Frank.

She was not surprised. And she

had news of her own. "I did receive a communication," she said. "It was an unsigned Christmas card, and it said Frank would be released in early spring. He is being held in the Far East, but the card said he will be out pretty soon."

She told me she had spent a lot of time trying to make sure Frank was OK. She had contacted the Red Cross and others because she was really worried.

I didn't know quite how to say it, so I just said it. "Has it occurred to you that this could be a hoax?" I asked. "That Frank does not work for the CIA at all? And that this is just some sad game?"

Dolores said some of her friends had told her the same thing. "But why would anybody try to trick somebody like that?" she said. "What would the purpose be? I am hopeful. I wish I could hear from Frank more frequently, but I am hopeful that he will be with me soon."

There are two ways to look at this. You could say the hoax will continue for as long as Frank wants to play it out.

Or you could say there really is a guy being held captive in the Far East and that the CIA will eventually get him back and he will rejoin Dolores and they will live happily ever after.

That is what Dolores believes. And this is a love story.